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FLEX: A Golden Opportunity for Motivating Students for Foreign Language Study

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FLEX is the common acronym used to describe a presequenced Foreign Language EXploratory course ranging in length from six to nine weeks. Such a course is designed to motivate students to pursue foreign language study, to develop their interest in the world and its peoples, and to increase their sensitivity to cultural similarities and differences. There are a variety of FLEX programs in existence (Grittner, 1974). Some are cultural in nature, others emphasize linguistics, and still others are career-based (Strasheim, 1982, p. 60). The FLEX course is usually offered in sixth, seventh, or eighth grade before foreign language study is formally begun and gives the students an introduction to several foreign languages and cultures. This enables students to make a choice of a foreign language at a later time based on experience.

Curriculum

Presently there are no textbooks available that set the curriculum for such a FLEX course, leaving the development of curriculum to individual teachers. The difficulty of finding appropriate materials to fill a nine-week introductory course for seventh-grade junior-high students justifies a look into possible methodologies, theories of language learning, and

techniques that might motivate students to enroll in a foreign language. In this writer's opinion, a methodologically eclectic approach is preferable, and is in keeping with the goals of the FLEX curriculum where a balance is sought between language acquisition and culture. The course should also be a true introduction to the first year of foreign language study and not a mere "fun and games" experience lacking in substance. Finally, it is imperative to impress upon students that foreign language study teaches much more than language skills: special attention should be given to developing good study habits and critical thinking skills, to teaching across the curriculum, and ultimately to sensitizing students to differences and similarities among world cultures and developing a sense of global perspective in the students.

An Effective Beginning: Destroying the Myth

It is always difficult to surmount the myth that foreign languages are difficult to learn. One way to address the affective needs of students is to begin with cognates. A carefully prepared overhead transparency with twenty-five target-language English cognates, for example, will quickly lessen fears about the language. Words should be ones whose meaning students will readily recognize from sight or sound. A short introduction to the relationship between English and the target language should follow this activity. Next, students can be divided into pairs, supplied with a cognate sheet containing seventy-five cognates, and told they have five minutes to find the English equivalents. (It is advisable to make frequent use of techniques that allow for pair work, group work, and student-centered activities. The proverb "Tell me and I will forget, teach me and I will remember, involve me and I will learn" is well worth remembering when teaching FLEX.)

The Asher Method, also known as "Total Physical Response" (TPR), is another tool that is well suited to increasing student participation and reducing anxieties in learning a foreign language. In this connection, it may be desirable to first explain right- and left-brain learning theory to the students and to do so by using illustrations from their own first-language acquisition. A concrete way of illustrating right-brain learning to students can easily be accomplished by bringing two balls to class, a blue and a red one. The students are asked to demonstrate various ways they would teach a two-year-old the difference between the red and the blue ball.

Invariably the students resort to commands—"Go get the blue ball. No, no, that's the red one, get the blue one." Other students point to similarly colored objects in the classroom, while still others touch items of the same color. It becomes clear to the students that by becoming involved in the learning ("learning by doing") that the learning is effective, fun, and stress-free. This discovery on the part of the students serves as a springboard for the teacher to illustrate the Asher (TPR) method: Through a series of commands such as "stand up," "sit down," and "point to the flag," students are physically involved in the action and fully participate in the learning process. A next logical step might be to teach body parts through a series of commands that the teacher models and that all students carry out simultaneously. After a few minutes of this activity, the students will have mastered numerous body parts and several commands. Simultaneously, they will have discovered firsthand that learning a foreign language is indeed not as difficult as they may have thought.

In order to promote success in the FLEX course and to reinforce good study habits, students should be required to keep a FLEX notebook, in which they record all in-class notes as well as daily assignments. This notebook can serve not only as an excellent study guide for quizzes and tests, but more importantly, it can instill in students good note-taking and organization skills.

For optimal learning to occur, it is important in any unit that is taught to incorporate all four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). Culture must also be infused and logically integrated to underscore the content of the lesson, not merely added on. In the remainder of this paper, a variety of strategies will be described that illustrate the use of the four skills to teach the German alphabet and numbers and to accomplish effective integration of culture. While German has been chosen for illustration, the techniques can be used to teach other foreign languages as well.

The Alphabet

A good starting point for FLEX classes is the alphabet. It can be taught in a variety of ways: one way is to divide it into four parts, *abcdefg*, *hijklmnop*, *qrstuvw*, *xyz*. Practice the individual sounds, reminding the students that in speaking German the mouth must be opened more widely than is typical for speakers of English. Illustrate where the tongue is

located in the mouth when these sounds are formed. After all sounds have been practiced, the alphabet song should be taught:

*a b c d e f g
h i j k l m n o p
q r s t u v w
x y z O weh!
kann nicht lernen das abc.*

(Mozart composed this melody. Hence, the opportunity to elaborate on Mozart and his music can be utilized.) A quick twenty-six-point test could consist of repeating or singing the alphabet the next day.

To practice the alphabet further, the German script can be taught via an overhead containing the German alphabet in script form. This is a very popular unit with younger students. To make it culturally authentic, a page can be copied out of an authentic German *Schulheft*. The students can copy a ten-line poem, or perhaps an English translation of the German national anthem, into this *Schulheft*.

Another way to practice the alphabet once some basic vocabulary has been learned is to incorporate DiDonato's "typewriter" activity: the teacher assigns each student a letter (a, b, c, . . .) and then calls out a word such as *Schule* ("school"). The student who is "s" stands up and says "s" in German; the student who is "c" does the same, followed by "h" and so on, until the word is correctly spelled in German. (As a homework assignment, students can be assigned to select five English words, none longer than eight letters, that they dictate in German to a classmate the following day.)

Classroom Phrases

In order to maximize the speaking of the target language by the students, the teacher should initially teach and display three phrases the students must always say in German: *Wie, bitte?* ("Repeat, please"), *Ich weiß nicht* ("I don't know"), and *Welche Seite, bitte?* ("Which page, please?"). By enforcing the "German-only" rule with these commonly posed questions in the classroom, English interruptions are kept to a minimum. Gradually, additional phrases can be added.

Numbers

The teaching of numbers is a must in all FLEX classes. Numbers can be taught in a variety of fun and exciting ways. Rather than starting with the number one and working one's way up to ten, for example, it has proven successful to begin with a set of colored, laminated numbers and an overhead projector. The teacher selects a number such as five and shows it to the class while saying: *Das ist die Nummer fünf. Sie ist lila. Ich lege die Nummer fünf mitten auf die Maschine* ("This is the number five. It is purple. I am placing the number five in the middle of the machine.") The students are provided with their own set of laminated, colored numbers and do as the teacher models. (Using this TPR technique, the instructor can teach colors while teaching numbers, as well as adverbs and prepositions such as *unter, über, neben, links, rechts, oben, and unten*). After the students have placed the numbers on their desks, they point to the numbers as the teacher calls them out. (The same can be done with colors.) Students may also be called to the overhead to point out numbers on the screen that their classmates call out.

Another excellent right-brain method for learning numbers is to illustrate them using body parts. For example:

- 1 = student points to nose
- 2 = student points to both ears
- 3 = student points to chin
- 4 = student points to shoulders
- 5 = student claps hands
- 6 = student shows six fingers
- 7 = student slaps hands on upper legs
- 8 = student holds up four fingers on both hands
- 9 = student gives thumbs up with both hands
- 10 = student crosses arms in front and stretches them out to the sides
- 11 = student holds right hand out
- 12 = student holds left hand out, etc.

This technique allows for a building process in learning numbers and has proven especially successful in working with children who have learning disabilities and who rank in lower reading groups. The students readily internalize these numbers in reference to the body parts.

There are also innumerable nursery rhymes in most languages that can be used to reinforce numbers. One popular one in German goes as follows:

*Eins, zwei, Polizei
Drei, vier, Offizier
Fünf, sechs, alte Hex'
Sieben, acht, gute Nacht
Neun, zehn, schlafen geh'n
Elf, zwölf, kommen die wölfe.*

(The students find this particular rhyme rewarding because they can readily recognize many of these words early in their study of German.) Another variant to teaching numbers is to teach the song "Ten Little Indians," which in German is called *Zehn kleine Mädchen*. It is important to include culturally authentic songs in the curriculum; they should, of course, be integrated when they are relevant to the material being discussed and studied.

Authentic Materials: Suggestions and Integration

Research has indicated that the use of authentic materials optimizes learning in the foreign language classroom (Rogers and Medley, 1988, p. 467). For example, a genuine German calendar can be placed on the overhead; students are then asked to go to the screen and point to the date the teacher calls out. (Even the function of calling out dates can be carried out by students to initiate and reinforce speaking skills.) The students see that a genuine German calendar usually lists days of the month in vertical fashion and contains only the abbreviations for the days of the week, which provides another good cultural lesson. Thus, when learning the days of the week, a student may be asked *Zeig mir Montag* ("Show me Monday"). Students quickly realize that *Montag* must be *MO*, and this contextual guessing helps develop critical thinking skills that are especially important for students to exercise at this age (Cooper, 1987). Pointing out the Germanic origins of the days of the week in English (Friday from *Frija*, a Germanic goddess; Thursday from *Thor's day*, and so on) stresses another point of similarity between the two cultures.

In order to ensure that the students are led to higher-proficiency tasks, the teacher should make optimal use of the target language in doing listening comprehension exercises such as: *Was heißt der Tag am Ende*

Woche, bevor das Weekend? ("What is the last day of the week called, before the weekend?"). Although the students will not understand every word, they will listen for important cues in order to respond. Students at the beginning level need the challenge of going a little beyond their current level of competence (cf. Krashen's [1982] "comprehensible input" theory).

Another excellent way of incorporating authentic materials into the FLEX curriculum while teaching numbers is to find an advertisement in a German newspaper that would appeal to the students. It is important to personalize the selection of authentic materials to capitalize on student interest (Omaggio, 1986, p. 47). A good choice might be an advertisement for jeans, overalls, and shirts such as is shown in figure 4-1.

With the advertisement on the overhead, the students are asked to answer the following questions: *Wieviel kosten die Piloten Jeans?* ("How much do the Pilot jeans cost?") *Wieviel kosten die Big Shirts?* ("How much are the Big Shirts?")

At this point German money can also be introduced. A poster board displaying German play money can serve as a point of departure for a comparison and contrast of German bills and U.S. bills. A variety of

modeland
für die und ihn

... reduziert, reduziert!!!

Original »Chicago«	79.-	49.-
Piloten-Jeans		
Overalls	149.-	79.-
modische Farben		
Big Shirt's	39.90	19.90
mit Nummer		

Kaiserslautern Marktstr.12

Figure 4-1. Clothing advertisement from a German newspaper

critical thinking skills in comparing the money of the two countries can be addressed: What can the pictures on the bills tell us about the people and the culture of a country? What are some possible reasons that political figures appear on U.S. bills, while paintings appear on German bills? (These questions allow students to brainstorm ideas and ultimately can lead to interesting discussions about a variety of aspects of the culture.) Differences and similarities are recorded on an overhead transparency. This activity, in turn, can serve as a springboard for a cultural discussion on the German artist Dürer. Conversion of the German *Mark* to the U.S. dollar can also be demonstrated. As a homework assignment, for example, students select and cut out five ads from a newspaper or magazine that picture something they would like as a gift. They must convert these amounts into German *Mark*. If German catalogs (*Quelle*, *Neckermann*) are available, this activity can be carried out by converting from *Mark* into dollars.

Another excellent source of authentic materials is the telephone book (Lalande, 1985). A page can be enlarged and placed on an overhead. As students view the overhead, the teacher poses a number of questions: "What is this?" "What can we find out about a person from a German telephone book?" "How do German telephone numbers differ from U.S. telephone numbers?" "What kinds of street names do they have?" By using the inside front page of the telephone book, one can teach the students how to reach the local operator and the international operator. (The material learned in this kind of FLEX activity should be recycled in a spiral fashion in first-year German.)

Once the numbers and alphabet have been mastered, the students can be taught the game of *Seeschlacht* ("Battleship"): For this game, the students are divided into pairs and play for twenty minutes. All students are provided with game grids (horizontal squares are numbered one through ten and vertical squares are labeled A through J) upon which they hide four battleships. Through a series of guesses and responses, the students attempt to find each other's ships. The first student to find the opponent's ships wins. The students have been equipped with a thorough knowledge of the alphabet and numbers and thus may not say one word in English; if they do not understand their partner, they must say *Wie, bitte?* ("Please repeat"). This is a true oral proficiency activity: the students are

exchanging information in the target language within a week of their first exposure to German.

Another good number activity is what can be called the "Swatch Watch." Students are taught the parts of a wristwatch (*Armbanduhr*) on an overhead transparency. They are taught the rudiments of telling time (*vor, nach, halb, Viertel vor/nach*). A worksheet containing the faces of several clocks (with specific times on them) is passed out. As a homework assignment, students write out in German the time that appears on each clock. The students are provided with the latest Swatch watch brochures (available at any store that sells Swatch watches) and may choose a pattern or create their own Swatch design. (This is done as homework; it helps the students to personalize the activity.) Once everyone has a watch in hand, the teacher calls out *Schreibe die Zahl drei auf die Uhr, schreibe die Zahl zwölf, usw.* ("Write the number three on your watch, write the number twelve, etc."). The teacher circulates around the room to make certain everyone is following carefully. The following day each student must approach the teacher and ask *Verzeihung, wie spät ist es, bitte?* ("Excuse me, can you tell me the time, please?"). The teacher whispers a definite time to each student, and the students draw the appropriate times on their watches. The teacher collects these and laminates them for the following day. The next day the students are handed their laminated Swatches and carry out the final "Swatch Watch Activity": They paper-clip their Swatch watch on their wrist and, using German only, ask as many classmates as possible in ten minutes for the time. This activity, again, is a student-centered communicative activity.

A Global Dimension

A creative approach to teaching colors in combination with culture is through the use of flags of the German-speaking countries. The teacher draws the flags of German-speaking countries on five-by-eight index cards and laminates them. Using exclusively the target language and the TPR technique, the teacher explains to the students what these flags are: *Das ist die Flagge von der DDR. Sie ist schwarz, rot und gold/gelb. Die DDR ist im Osten, rechts neben der Bundesrepublik.* ("This is the flag of the GDR. It is black, red, and gold/yellow. The GDR is located in the east, to the right of Germany.") The teacher hands the flag to a student, who stands up next to the teacher. The teacher continues: *Das ist die Flagge*

von der Bundesrepublik. Sie ist auch schwarz, rot und gold. Die BRD liegt neben der DDR. ("This is the flag of the Federal Republic of Germany. It is also black, red, and gold. The FRG is located next to the GDR.") This flag, too, is given to a student to hold, and the same procedure is followed until all the German-speaking countries are represented by students standing before the class. The students position themselves and hold the flags so as to reflect the relative geographical locations of the countries. (Several groups of students can be brought to the front of the room in turn.) The capitals of the countries can be learned the same way. The students have thus learned the German names of the German-speaking countries, their capitals, their flags, and where they are located.

Further cultural lessons can easily be incorporated by discussing related topics such as the neutrality (white cross) of Switzerland, or perhaps the symbolism on the DDR flag (wheat, hammer, compass). This activity can be extended to Germany's neighbors by providing students with a handout containing the flags of these countries (Strasheim, 1982b). The students color them for the next day and cut them out. The teacher models in front of the class as each student uses his or her set to carry out TPR-like commands: *Leg die Flagge von Dänemark über die Flagge der Bundesrepublik; die Flagge ist rot und weiss mit einem weissen Kreuz.* ("Place the flag of Denmark above the flag of the Federal Republic of Germany; the flag is red and white with a white cross.") Globalizing such activities not only prepares the students for the world, but also allows the teacher to teach across the curriculum.

Reaching beyond the Classroom

One of the desired elements of a FLEX class is to get parents involved in classroom activities. An activity that works especially well is to have the students ask their parents or older siblings to answer the following three questions:

1. What comes to mind when you hear the phrase "Made in Germany"?
2. What is the last newspaper story you can recall that had to do with Germany?
3. To which field(s) has Germany made a large contribution?

The students record the answers in their notebooks. The next day the teacher records parental responses on an overhead transparency. (Some of the most frequent answers to the first question, for example, include cars, food, china, beer, wine, candy, and clocks.) The answers are divided into rubrics (such as cars: Porsche, Volkswagen, Audi, Mercedes, and BMW).

The Bulletin Board: A Showplace of Culture

An excellent way to make the students aware of the German influences on U.S. culture is through the bulletin board. Students are asked to bring into class an advertisement or a picture of any product produced in Germany. Within three days the entire bulletin board will likely be a collage of Gummi Bear bags, pictures of clocks, watches, beer steins, Hummel figurines, chocolate bar wrappers, electrical appliances (e.g., Braun), and cars. A poster containing numerous words from German such as *kindergarten*, *delicatessen*, and *pumpernickel* can be produced and displayed. Pictures of famous German composers and scientists can also be included. As a hands-on activity, the students turn their desks toward the bulletin board and are told to divide all products and items that appear on the bulletin board into categories and write them into their notebooks. (The student who records the most items under the appropriate rubrics in fifteen minutes receives extra credit points.) The teacher then asks the students to state the items found and records them on an overhead transparency. This leads to numerous interesting discussions regarding the origins of foods (*torte*, *strudel*, *sauerkraut*, *hamburger*, *frankfurter*, *Kaiser rolls*); literature (Grimm's fairy tales, *Faust*); music (Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Bach); sports heroes (Becker, Witt, Laner) and much more. The same type of activity can be carried out with German Christmas customs and their influence on U.S. customs (Nast's first caricature of Santa Claus, the Advent calendar, the Advent wreath, many familiar Christmas carols).

A Closer Look at Our Own Culture

It is interesting for the students to discuss German immigration to the United States in 1863. The Goethe Institute poster "Germany: A Slice of American Pie" can serve as a point of departure for this historical lesson.

The teacher can conduct an informal ethnic survey of German heritage among the students, compare the results with the 28 percent figure of German ethnicity in the United States at large, and point out that German is the largest ethnic minority in the United States. Famous Americans from Germany or of German heritage can be highlighted. (It is quite an insight for students to see the large number of Germans who have made contributions to the United States.) Stressing such similarities and joint efforts helps build an affinity within the students for German culture and motivates them to want to learn more about it (Strasheim, 1981).

Conclusion

There are innumerable activities that can be carried out in the nine-week FLEX program, and this article has sought to highlight a few of them, using German for illustrative purposes. It is important to stress all four skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing as well as culture. The materials should be taught in a spiral manner, to enable the topic to be recycled on a higher level the following year in the foreign language classroom. The activities must be selected according to the age, personal needs, and interests of the students and the personal teaching style of the teacher. New units should be continually devised to enhance the FLEX course and added to the repertoire of materials. This keeps both the teacher and the students fresh and eager to learn.

Where they exist at all, FLEX programs are usually aimed at seventh or eighth graders. The FLEX course thus provides foreign language teachers with a golden opportunity to expose students to the merits and enjoyment of learning a foreign language and culture.

Note

1. For further information, please contact Aleidine J. Moeller, Chair, Foreign Languages, Central High School, 124 North 20th Street, Omaha, NE 68102, 402-978-7141 or 402-978-7100.

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